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RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000330

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NEA/ELA, NSC FOR MARCHESE, H FOR CODEL WOLF

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: CODEL WOLF IN DAMASCUS: THE OPPOSITION AND THE GRAND MUFTI

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary. Congressmen Wolf, Pitts and Aderholt met with members of Syrian civil society, political opposition figures, businessmen and religious leaders on their two-day visit to Damascus. All were eager to engage the Congressmen.

Most expressed hope that the U.S. administration could be convinced that the time is right for dialogue with Syria. Grand Mufti Hassoun warned against driving Asad & into the lap of the military8. Opposition leader and former political prisoner Riad Seif blasted Asad,s regime for corruption and its oppressive security tactics, but also commented that the regime might respond positively to carrots) such as the return of a U.S. Ambassador) as well as to sticks. End Summary.

SOCIAL EVENTS

¶12. (C) Congressmen Frank Wolf (R-VA), Joseph Pitts (R-PA), and Robert Aderholt (R-AL) visited Damascus March 30) April 1, accompanied by Wolf,s Chief of Staff Daniel Scandling. On March 30, Embassy Damascus hosted a small reception for CODEL Wolf at the Ambassador,s residence, where CODEL members had an opportunity to exchange views on a range of subjects with a cross-section of Syrian civil society. Prior to the reception CODEL Wolf spent 45 minutes with prominent and outspoken opposition leader Riad Seif. On March 31, CODEL Wolf had coffee with local business leaders, who complained that sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act were hurting the average Syrian by denying access to state-of-the-art medical equipment and IT connections with the rest of the world, while not applying any significant pressure on the regime to change its policies. The session concluded with a request that CODEL Wolf tell the Bush administration that dialogue with Syria is necessary to solve regional conflicts.

THE GRAND MUFTI ON EXTREMISM, LEBANON AND PRESIDENT ASAD

¶13. (C) On March 31, CODEL Wolf met with Syria,s highest-ranking Sunni religious figure, Grand Mufti Dr. Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun, for approximately 45 minutes at the Mufti,s offices in Damascus. Hassoun spoke of Syrian society,s tolerance of all religions and his own respect for all religious prophets. On the subject of insurgency, Hassoun said that terrorism has no faith, but that when men feel hopeless and cannot see a way out of their situation

they will take extreme measures, even becoming suicide bombers, simply to be able to act. Syria, he commented, was the victim of terrorism 27 years ago but managed to drive it out. He added that religious extremism is, therefore, currently more of a problem in the U.S. than in Syria, and that the USG should look inside its own borders before lecturing others. On hearing of the CODEL's planned meeting with Asad, Hassoun took several minutes to explain the important of USG-SARG dialogue. Asad should know that opportunities for such dialogue exist, because otherwise he would feel hemmed in, Hassoun said. Hassoun cautioned that the USG should be wary of reinforcing that feeling, as it might &drive Asad into the lap of the military⁸, and the chance for dialogue would pass.

¶4. (C) Discussing Lebanon and Israel, Hassoun said that Syria hopes to work with Lebanon and stop any further Israeli-Hizbollah fighting. If Israel were to work towards resolving the Shebaa Farms and border disputes, this would turn Hizbollah into a toothless entity, he said. He added that Syria doesn't object to the idea of a Hariri tribunal, because Hariri was a friend, but rather that Syria is concerned that some elements want to use the Hariri issue as a wedge between Lebanon and Syria. The CODEL closed by inviting Hassoun to the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington. Hassoun responded with an invitation for Secretary Rice to visit Syria.

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RIAD SEIF

¶5. (C) Prominent Syrian opposition leader and former political prisoner Riad Seif described for the congressmen in a March 30 meeting his range of negative experiences with the

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SARG as a businessman, during his 1994 and 1998 successful runs for Parliament, and as a leader of the Damascus Spring movement after President Asad took office. (Note: Seif was convicted in the fall of 2001 on charges of &trying to change the constitution⁸ for having suggested the lifting of martial law and was released in January 2006. End Note.) He said that his youngest son, Ead, disappeared mysteriously in August 1996 and has never been found) something he blames squarely on the SARG.

¶6. (C) Seif addressed the common critique of the Syrian opposition as being weak by noting that, in fact, the few thousand members of the opposition were strong, given all of the restrictions placed on them. Seif opined that President Asad was strong enough to lead reforms in Syria if he chose to do so but noted that the Syrian leader was like a mafia figure and would only change his behavior when it was in his personal interest. Seif suggested that Asad's main concern right now was the proposed formation of an International Tribunal in Lebanon and the possibility that he would be accused in the murder of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri. He called on the U.S. to find a comprehensive solution to the Middle East conflict, asserting that it would significantly undercut popular support for Hamas, Hizbollah, Al-Qaeda and Iran. In response to a question from the Congressmen, Seif recommended the return of a U.S. Ambassador to Syria, saying that he was &for giving the regime some carrots⁸ if in turn the regime was successfully forced to provide in exchange an easing up on the opposition's freedom of expression and movement.

¶7. (C) CODEL Wolf did not have the opportunity to clear this cable before departure.

CORBIN